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Raymond C. Amelio

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Oral Memoirs
of
Raymond C. Amelio

An Interview
Conducted by
Megan DeFries
November 22, 2016

Collection: Oral History Initiative
Project: Duquesne Veterans'

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Interview History

The recording(s) and transcript(s) of the interview(s) were processed in the offices of the Oral History Initiative (OHI) and University Archives, Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania.

Interviewer: Megan DeFries

Transcriber: Lauren Eisenhart-Purvis

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Project Detail

The purpose of the Duquesne Veterans' Oral History Project is to record and preserve the stories of Duquesne's veteran students and alumni in order to highlight the many ways they have contributed to our country and to Duquesne.

Raymond C. Amelio [b. 1945] served in the US Navy and US Marine Corps from 1966 to 1969. He attended Duquesne University before his service from 1964 to 1965 and following his service from 1969 to 1971.

Megan DeFries is the oral historian for the OHI.

Raymond C. Amelio

Oral History Memoir
Interview Number 1

Interviewed by Megan DeFries
November 22, 2016
Duquesne University
Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Collection: Oral History Initiative
Project: Duquesne Veterans'

DeFries: This is Megan DeFries interviewing Raymond Amelio, a veteran of the United States Navy, for the Duquesne Veterans' Oral History Project. It is Tuesday, November 22, 2016, and we're in the Gumberg Library at Duquesne University. Thank you for being here, Ray.

Amelio: You're welcome.

DeFries: I appreciate you sharing your story today. So I just thought we would start, just briefly, with your family background, when and where you were born.

[00:00:24]

Amelio: Pittsburgh native, I was born on the North Side of Pittsburgh. We grew up there. Attended Oliver High School; graduated in 1963. My father came from Italy when he was seventeen in 1926, so I'm first generation on his side, and my mom was born in Pittsburgh, but her mom and dad came from Italy, in like '05 [1905] or '06 [1906]. So (clears throat) we grew up on the North Side on Woodland Avenue; very nice street, really a nice neighborhood, lots of different people from all kinds of backgrounds, but everybody got along and [it] just was a really nice place to grow up. So I have two older brothers and Sam went to Pitt [University of Pittsburgh], Bobby went to Duquesne [University], both undergraduate and law school, and he—he received his commission because he was in ROTC [Reserve Officers' Training Corps], and then a younger sister who went to Pitt. So two Duquesne's and two Pitt's.

DeFries: Okay. (laughs)

Amelio: So we all went to school locally.

DeFries: What made you choose Duquesne?

[00:01:38]

Amelio: Well actually, I didn't. That's part of my story. I came to Duquesne after I graduated, in protest. As an eighteen year—seventeen-year-old senior, I wanted to go away to school, but my father insisted that I commute because both of my brothers did. Sam went to Pitt; Bobby went to Duquesne. And so I started in '64, and came for a year and a half and actually didn't do so well because I was going to school in protest. So in June of '65, I received—my best friend from Oliver and I both came to Duquesne and we both received a letter from Father McAnulty, more or less telling us that we needed to sit out a semester to figure out what we wanted to do with the rest of our lives, as I remember it [ed. note: Father McAnulty was president of Duquesne University 1959-1980]. And that was in June, and by late July or early August—if you know anything about that time frame—we received draft notices.

DeFries: Did you know that—that it was a possibility?

[00:02:48]

Amelio: Yeah, I probably did, but didn't think about it. I just—my father was not happy. But, you know, I didn't want to come here then, so I said to David, "Do you want to go into the army?" and he said, "No." So he did some research and he found a three-year enlistment in the navy, which was really kind of interesting because usually it was enlistments for four years. But I remember the name, it was called the Cache Program. It was a three-year enlistment, and we didn't have to go on active duty till spring of—March of '66, (taps hand on table) and this was—when we finally found all this out—by the time he did the research and the draft notice came, but we—we weren't immediately being called up. He found the program and that would've been around this time—November—and we didn't have to go on active duty until March of '66. So that was a good thing. So we ended up joining the navy and part of this program, we could go to boot camp together. So we were in the same company in boot camp, which was pretty cool.

DeFries: That's lucky.

[00:03:59]

Amelio: Because we—we had been friends since kindergarten. We were friends all through grade school, all through high school, and we're still good friends, actually. And so we went on active duty in March of '66. And we went up to the Great Lakes [Naval Station Great Lakes, Illinois] and it was very cold, as I remember it. And—and we went through all those boot camps things that you do, like—

DeFries: Can you describe a little of the training?

Amelio: Well, first of all, it is very humbling because you're living in a barracks with—let me see, would there have been about forty other guys? No privacy at all, you know, none—no privacy, and the company commander who screams at you continuously and tells you you're doing things wrong. And—but, you know, knowing—having also been part of the marines, which we'll go into later, navy boot camp wasn't bad. I think they teach you in navy boot camp primarily discipline, obviously, but they also teach you—my mother said, "They must teach you to be really clean because you scrub your clothes and hang them on the line," and I think the kind of things that they teach you when you're on a ship, if you don't take care of that it could become real

sloppy real fast. So, you know, part of boot camp was always keeping your area around your bunk clean and orderly, making sure that your bed was made properly, all these petty things that used to drive me crazy. And so that was—and they had shortened, as I remember it, boot camp was—used to have—previously been maybe fourteen weeks, but I believe [when] we went through, it was twelve [weeks]. I think it was twelve. They had reduced it a little bit because they needed to get people on line because the war was really ratcheting up, the Vietnam War. [It] started in '62 with advisors and by '65 they had a couple of operations, and by '66 they were starting to ratchet things up and—and so I think that we had a shorter boot camp. So—(clears throat)

DeFries: How much did you pay attention to the war prior to getting your draft notice? Was it something you paid close attention to or was it kind of in the background?

[00:06:24]

Amelio: It was in the background. You know, I just—the only time that I really woke up is when I opened the letter and I went, Oh okay. And so even—and then when once David found the—found this enlistment and we knew that we didn't have to go until March, it was party time, you know, because I had gotten a job that—since I was—let me see, how would that have worked? That fall, I got a job at Kaufmann's [ed. note: Former Pittsburgh-based department store] and I was working in the restaurant. So I was making money and doing okay, knowing full well that that would all go away come March. So—and as I remember it—that was a very good holiday, Christmas holiday because it was no pressure, other than the pressure of thinking about going on to active duty in a couple of months, but again, that was—I put that in the back of my mind for a while. So— (papers rustling)

DeFries: You got through boot camp and then what did you decide to do? Or what was your training coming out of boot camp?

[00:07:34]

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Well, once—by the way, getting to boot camp, we took a train, which was interesting. We took a train from the train station at Station Square [ed. note: Former Pittsburgh & Lake Erie Railroad Station] and went up to the Great Lakes, and I had never been on a train where you slept over because we went overnight to get to Chicago [Illinois]. But after we finished up boot camp, I stayed at Great Lakes and went to a hospital corpsman school, which was up in the Great Lakes and David went to quartermaster's school and he went down to Norfolk [Virginia], the naval training station down there [Naval Station Norfolk].

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) Okay.

Amelio: And so, they did shorten corps school because they were really starting to need corpsmen because corpsmen were getting killed in Vietnam and they needed more to get over into the combat, and just around the world, because of all the activity. So corps school, as I understood it, had been sixteen weeks and I think that they reduced ours to either ten or twelve weeks, but I know that we [were in boot camp]—March, April, May, I think we finished up in May, and then I think corps school was May, June, July, (taps hand on table) and we finished up in August. Yes, we finished up in

August. And after I finished up—and that was an interesting—it was a good program. We learned a lot about, you know, taking care of people and treating people and making sure you could stabilize [injured and sick] people. And the name of our commander was—she was Lieutenant Commander Jones. Very nice woman, and kind of petite, but very nice. She really—she really cared about the people in her class. So we went—we graduated and—

DeFries: Was that—I'm sorry—was that your first choice for—to be a corpsman?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) No. Actually I had put several things [jobs] before that, but at that time—because I thought that a friend of mine—growing up on the North Side, I worked at Jordan Pharmacy and the man who owned it, Mike Mancuso, was really very close, was almost like a second dad to me. And he always said, “If you become a pharmacist, you can have this store.” But I wasn't math and science oriented, but, you know, I still always loved working in a drug store and I learned a lot, so when I went to put down my choices, I think my first choice would've been the— (taps hand on table) like a writer, in some—what did they call it? [Amelio note: office administration]

DeFries: Oh—

Amelio: What the heck did they call that? Anyway, I had three choices before corpsman, but I put that down there. Well, when they came back with the decisions, that's what they had given me. And everybody said, “Why would you even put that down? Don't you know what's going on Vietnam?” And I said, “Well, it's too late now.” So that's how I got into corps school.

DeFries: Okay.

[00:10:33]

Amelio: So we graduated in—must have been mid-August. I might be getting some of these dates wrong now, I guess I could see it if I—I have all my orders; I could probably put the chronology together, but it was sometime in August. And then (clears throat) I stayed there for a little bit after we graduated, and then I went home on leave, and then I received my assignment and my assignment was to the USS *Wasp*, which was an anti-submarine aircraft carrier based out of Boston. And it was housed at Saint—South Boston Annex is where it was. And I remember going up to Boston [Massachusetts] and, interestingly enough, I flew up and that was my first airplane ride. I had never flown in an airplane before. And I remember it was a TWA [Trans World Airlines] prop plane and had no idea what to expect. So I guess that by that time, what would I have been? How old would I have been? That would've been—I was like twenty. No, no, no, wait a minute. I turned twenty-one at corps school; so, I would've been twenty-one. So, you know, growing up in the neighborhood I did, you just didn't fly. I had never flown before, so that was my first airplane ride, which was exciting.

And so I reported to the ship and I remember I took a cab, or they picked me up somehow, and I got to this ship and I just looked up. I saw this gigantic ship and I went, Oh my God. And you know aircraft carriers is what's now considered small, but I remember looking and I just looked up, and I kept on looking up, and it was so

big. So I walked across the gangway, saluted the flag, and was greeted by some of the people who were going to take me down to sickbay [infirmery], where I was going to be working. And that was an interesting—I was on the ship from the fall of '66 to June of '67 and during that time frame, we had several cruises down into the Caribbean and we picked *Gemini 12* [ed. note: The tenth and final manned flight of NASA's Project Gemini series].

DeFries: Can you describe that?

[00:12:56]

Amelio: Yeah, that was—that was exciting. We had been out in the ocean and I think we—that was probably the longest we were deployed because we had been out—because we were doing some maneuvers, knowing full well that they would be coming in and I remember when they finally started to—we were following their—tracking their progress, then they said they had come into orbit and they were going to be coming in to the—come landing into the Atlantic [Ocean], and we were nearby. They had the trajectory figured out. And we actually could see it, when it [the space capsule] came down, we were able to see it come down and splash into the water. And the one—the two astronauts was—the one I can remember was Buzz Aldrin [Edwin E. Aldrin, Jr.]; the other fellow I always forget [ed. note: James A. Lovell, Jr.]. I can get you that information because I have a [Amelio note: He has a newsletter detailing the story]—I should've brought my stuff; I forgot to do that this morning because I have a little package of information. But we picked them up, brought them on board and brought the capsule on and you could see where it was burned as it came in because it had the [heat] shield on it and put that in the hangar deck. And if you know anything about an aircraft carrier, they keep the planes in the hangar deck and then bring them up to the flight deck on an elevator. So they brought the capsule in and it was in the hangar bay and you could go see it. And then they had a big celebration for them—not that day, the following day because they had to check them out and make sure they were okay—and it was very exciting.

DeFries: Did you get to meet them?

Amelio: We did, we did. In fact, (taps on table) I might—I believe on one of my documents I might have one of their autographs, I think. But they were very nice and talked to the ship's company and were very thankful we were there to pick them up, and it was a lot of fun, it was a lot of fun. So that would've been—(clears throat) that was like the spring of '67, I believe, because we had gone to Mardi Gras prior to that, we were one of the—we were one of the features. We had gone to—we were at the dock for Mardi Gras [New Orleans, Louisiana] and we went back up to Boston, then when went out again, and that's when we picked them up because by June of '67, we had been—after we had picked them up, we were on another maneuver and we were in the Atlantic. In fact, it was— (taps on table) let me think about this now.

DeFries: It was *Gemini 12*, you said?

Amelio: *Gemini 12*.

DeFries: Okay. I had that it was November 1966.

Amelio: November of '66.

DeFries: Yeah.

Amelio: Is that what it was? Okay. Well that would—

DeFries: I can double check.

[00:15:40]

Amelio: No, that would—that would make sense because I joined the ship's company in October, so okay—so it could've been November and then we went into the New Year in '67. You're right about that, it would've been '66 because then we came back to—we came back to (taps on table) Boston and probably pretty much were there until the holidays were over, and then we went out again on another maneuver. So you're right about that. Yeah, October, November, December, and January, February and sometime in—well, I know when it was. On Good Friday of '67 [March 24, 1967], we were loading fuel from a ship called the USS *Salamonie*, and we had just finished bringing over the JP-5, which is the jet fuel, and had brought in the lines and something happened to their after steering and they came in and crashed into us. Three times.

DeFries: Oh wow.

Amelio: I mean, I still can remember they hit us—they hit the elevator three times and every time they did, it just was like the whole ship shook. And they were able to extricate themselves and get away and we did some damage [to that ship] because we had hit their superstructure. And I was thinking that we were on like—I forget how many meters of water and I'm thinking to myself, This ship's going to sink. (both laugh) But we didn't.

DeFries: Did it jar the ship?

Amelio: Yeah it jarred the whole ship. I mean, it went, "Boom!" And I'm standing there, watching it because I was on the hangar deck and I could see it coming in and just smashing into the elevator. So after that happened—then we went down to Puerto Rico for some small repairs, and we were down there for a while. And then we came home and it was decided that we were going to go into dry dock because they needed to do some more repairs. So on our way back up, they unloaded all of the weapons (taps on table) that we were carrying. And we always knew that we were anti-submarine and the marines protected down where all the ammunition was. The only thing that I know is after—it took a day and a half for them to unload everything and when they were done unloading it, the ship came out of the water about seven feet.

DeFries: Wow.

[00:18:03]

Amelio: So there was a lot of ordnance down there. So then we went—we came up the coast and I guess we probably went to the repair yards somewhere down around Norfolk. And after that, when that was transpiring, which would've been in the June time

frame, that's when I got my orders to go to Camp Lejeune [Jacksonville, North Carolina] to join the marine corps as a field corpsman. I was going down to Camp Lejeune for field medical training, which wasn't—made me a real happy camper.

DeFries: Did you know what was coming after?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Well, I knew that, you know, if you're going that means you're going to be assigned to the marine corps, so you're going to be in the field with marines, and by that time I was in my second—approaching the end of my second year. So—somebody's—oh, that's all right. I just want to—yeah. [Receives phone call]

pause in recording

DeFries: Sorry, just one second. Okay.

Amelio: (clears throat) So that would've been June, July, and August of '67, so I would've been approaching going into my—the end of my second year in the service. And usually one of the things that I thought about—well there's—that would've been like July and August of '67, and my discharge date would've been February of '69, so I'm thinking that they had a deal that if you probably didn't have a full year, you know, they probably wouldn't send you over. So I wasn't sure how this was all going to play out because at that time I still had, like, eighteen months. So I went through field medical training and that was god awful.

DeFries: Can you describe some of the training?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Well, you went out in the field and you learned how to treat battle injuries, and we'd go out at two o'clock in the morning on these long marches, and it was hot and there was bugs and mosquitoes and you walk through swamps and—they were trying to simulate what it was like to be in combat. And if anybody knew me that was the last thing that I'd ever want to do. Soldiering was not something that—that's why we joined the navy, (DeFries laughs) so we wouldn't have to do that. But anyway—and I remember it was—it would rain and we'd sleep in tents and get C-rats, [C-rations or Meal Combat Individual, MCI] and again, they were trying to simulate, somewhat, what it would be like in the field; and how you would treat the guys and the things you'd have to do to treat wounded soldiers in the field. So we went through that, it must've been—yeah, I got there in June, so it would've been June, July, and August. And then, after that, I was assigned to a company at Camp Lejeune, and I was like a corpsman for one of the units that was there and I thought—so that would've been October—or September, October, November, and December, and in December then I would be approaching my last year. And I thought, Oh, this is getting close, maybe I'm going to just stay here. Well, in December I got my orders for Vietnam.

DeFries: What was that like?

[00:21:19]

Amelio: That was kind of a—not a happy day because I knew having gone through this training, I knew what to expect times twelve. So then, I had to call home and let my parents know and they really weren't happy.

DeFries: What was their reaction?

Amelio: Well, they just—they knew, they knew, especially my dad, he knew and my brothers, they knew it was going to be coming. There was always a possibility once you get over there that—I was dating a girl at the time and I told her, I said—they were starting to talk about—(taps on table) the Tet Offensive was starting to occur and they were talking about—they were mentioning things about Khe Sahn [Vietnam]. And I was off for the month of January before I had to leave and during that January of '68, it was really starting to kick up and you were starting to read about the Tet Offensive and all the things and lots of casualties, and Khe Sahn was starting to occur. They were writing about Khe Sahn (taps on table) and I said to this woman I was dating, I said, "You know what? With my luck, that's where I'm going to end up." It was kind of prophetic when I think about it.

So I was off the month of January and then interestingly enough, the way they got you to Vietnam, they flew you on commercial aircraft. So you would be flying with passengers going to California and everywhere because I flew from Pittsburgh to Los Angeles and from Los Angeles to Hawaii. And then we picked up—I remember a Braniff [International Airways]—which doesn't exist—a Braniff flight took us from Hawaii to Okinawa [Japan]. And I remember it was so weird because the flight attendants at that time on Braniff, they were wearing all these real funky clothes, seventies clothing, and weird outfits, and that's how they greeted us. And they treated us very well because, by that time, when we got on the flight at Hawaii, it was totally military guys going to Vietnam.

So we landed in Okinawa and was there for five days, and when you were in Okinawa, what you did was they gave you a place to store all your gear, so they would have it there so when you came back, you could pick it up and then leave. Obviously, a lot of people didn't because of what happened. So when we finally got to Okinawa, we were in the barracks and we were coming in and guys were coming out of Vietnam that had been through the year. You'd just ask them how it was and they said, "Oh man, it's not fun," and "It's pretty rough out there," but they were just so thankful that they had made it and you just had to—had to be so happy for them, but then you wondered, My God, what's going to happen with you?

DeFries: What were your feelings waiting in Okinawa?

[00:24:17]

Amelio: Oh, I was afraid. You know, I had—I had no clue what to even begin to think about and I knew that if I was going to be with a line company, which was a pretty good idea that I would, there's going to be a lot of trouble ahead and a lot of apprehension. And I have to admit, I was scared because I didn't know what to expect. So after we had been there three or five days, we got on another commercial flight that flew us over to Da Nang [Vietnam]. And then from Da Nang we got off and then you—and I believe there were other—there were other people—no, that must've been all marines. (taps on table) That would've been all marines because we went to

Okinawa; I don't think there was anybody else but marines on that flight and corpsmen. So we got to Da Nang, and then we did a sorting out and some people greeted me and a few others, and they said that they would be taking us to Phu Bai, where the Third Marine Division headquarters were at that time. So I was assigned. I think I believe I knew that from my orders that I was going to be assigned to the Third Marine Division.

So when we got to Phu Bai, [I] was greeted by a chief petty officer, who told us that we would be getting our assignments within the next day or two. And so we spent some time during those days just learning about the base and talking to people. And then the morning of the third day, we got called to the barracks and the chief said that we have your assignments. And he said—there were three corpsmen, myself and two others—he said [to one corpsman], “You're going to go with this company and you'll get your flak gear when you get with your company,” [and to the other corpsman], “You're going to go to this company and you're going to get your flak gear,” and he said [to me], “You need to pick up your flak gear now and your helmet because you're going to be joining the Twenty-sixth Marines.” And I said, “Well, why don't they have to get their stuff until they join the company and why am I getting mine now?” He says, “Well you're with the Twenty-sixth Marines and they're at Khe Sahn,” and I thought to myself, what I told Donna, I said, Um-hm. I was right.

So then, that afternoon the pilot came in to talk to us and there were other marines that were going to go up there, too, and he says, “Here's how this works—you know that they're surrounded and there's a siege going on and people are getting hurt. The way this will work, there's a runway right down the middle of the camp. When we land,” on a C-130, “We won't stop. We'll slow down, drop the back,” you know, a C-130, the back drops, “And what you do is, grab your gear and you run off and there's a trench line along the edge of the runway. You hit that because incoming is going to start to come in. We're taking off.” I said—well I can't tell you what I said, but—I don't know, okay. (DeFries laughs) So the first time we attempted that maneuver, incoming started to come in and the plane took off because he said—and he said, “I guess you see we didn't land. We're going back to Phu Bai.” We couldn't; there was too much incoming. He said, “We'll try it later on today or tomorrow.”

DeFries: What did that first pass through make you feel?

Amelio: Oh, I was petrified because we had started coming down and all of a sudden, we swooped up, was flung around, and went back down. And so I thought, This is not good. So we went back and relaxed and I knew, it was real—I can remember being really nervous. So around four o'clock, he said, “We're going to give it another try,” so got on the plane and went up. This time he landed, we ran off, and I got to the trench line. And a little funny story that happened, when I was at home on leave they told us—one of the things that they said was you need to make sure that all of your clothing is dark green. So as a sailor, you had white underwear. So they said you need to have—either get new underwear or tint your underwear because you don't want to have anything that will be reflected in combat. So I told my mother, I said, “My underwear needs to be dyed green.” So I didn't pay any attention until the night that I was ready to leave and I packed my duffel bag and I said, “Do you have my underwear done?” She said, “Yeah, it's downstairs.” I went down, well it was the color of this right here, of really—

DeFries: Light green.

[00:29:00]

Amelio: —like a lime green. I said, “Ma, it’s supposed to be like this [duffel] bag [dark green],” and she said, “Well, I didn’t know. That’s what I did.” And I said, “Fine” and I threw it in the bag (DeFries laughs) and went on my way. So going back to when I was running off the plane to get to that trench line because there was incoming starting to come in, you could hear it, and there were explosions around—I dropped my duffel bag, and I hadn’t locked it, and it flew open and all this green underwear blew down the runway. And so, (both laugh) when I got to the trench line, I dragged the rest of my bag and I had what I had left and—I had put the underwear on top—I got to the trench line. So the guys came out to greet me that I was going to be working with at the battalion aid station, and they said, “Hey Doc, what was that stuff flying down the runway?” I said, “Don’t even ask.” (DeFries laughs) So for the rest of the year—and you didn’t want—for the rest of the year there was no underwear, but in Vietnam it was so hot and humid, you didn’t care anyway.

So then, I was at Khe Sahn and lot of incoming over the nights that I was there and lots of guys getting hurt, and there’s a lot of things going on, and it was just—it was a horrible year, you know. It was dirty and messy and you couldn’t get cleaned, and lived in a trench line. The trench line was probably ten feet deep and where we stayed was actually a hole in the trench line, it was in the dirt, and then you were sleeping with a sleeping bag on whatever you could fill to get yourself off the floor, off the ground. And it would rain and get all muddy and there were a lot of rats. I mean, it was really—it was not a nice place, (taps on table) and—but you learn—it’s interesting, one of the things that I did learn in my time in the military, you do learn how to adjust and figure things out. (taps on table) And if anybody would’ve told me that I would’ve been able to go through this and survive all of this, I’d have said you’re all crazy. But you adjust, you just—you do what you have to do to get things done and to survive. I mean, that’s just the way it is.

And so, that happened—we worked—that continued, then all of a sudden, I guess things happened in [Washington] DC [District of Columbia]. And, as I understand it, President Johnson had a model of Khe Sahn on his desk in DC because that was going to be a defining battle. If that fell, that would be like Dien Bien Phu would’ve been for the French twenty years earlier, and he did not want to be the first president to lose a war. So finally, around sometime in the spring, it did break up and we moved out and the army moved in. And I guess things had started to settle down at that time frame. So then, we went—they took us back down to Da Nang and gave us some in-country R&R [rest and recuperation].

DeFries: How long did they give you?

[00:32:11]

Amelio: We were there for about two—two and a half weeks, I believe, or two weeks, so there was some time for us to decompress because I was with the First Battalion—I was with the Twenty-sixth Marines. So we were there and got new—new fatigues and new boots and they fed us nicely and gave us beer and just gave us some time to relax. And then we got a new assignment and they sent us down to the A Shau Valley

and—which really turned out to be very bad and we lost a lot of guys there. And I was wounded once at Khe Sahn, you know, not badly—

DeFries: What—what kind of wound did you—

[00:32:54]

Amelio: Shrapnel in my back and my arm. And so we went on those maneuvers down in the A Shau Valley and really lost a lot of guys, wounded and killed. And I was wounded a second time and that would've been August of '68. So March of '68, I was wounded the first time and in August of '68. So when I was—and again, it was shrapnel that hit my hands and my arms. So when that happened, because I had been wounded a second time, they took me out of the field and moved me to the Third Medical Battalion. And the Third Medical Battalion had been located at Phu Bai, but during that time, it was transitioning up to Quang Tri, which was much closer to the DMZ [ed. note: The demilitarized zone, located near the former border between North and South Vietnam on the seventeenth parallel] because there was a lot of activity. The marines were always assigned to I Corps, which was that area right below the DMZ, in that area, and Third Medical Battalion was being moved from Phu Bai to Quang Tri. So when I joined them, they were all—they were putting up tents and everything (taps on table) because it was temporary. And then very quickly after that, they started taking the tents down and they started building wood hooches and they built a chow hall. They put in Quonset hut wards, they put in an operating room—it was amazing how fast they built all of that stuff [Amelio note: referring to the field hospital]. By the time I left in—would've been late February, early March of '69—it was a very well-built field hospital. (taps on table) We had the ability—I believe there were five or six operating rooms where we could go in and stabilize the wounded, to either put them in the wards or get them on a hospital ship for more definitive treatment. So yeah, that came up very quickly, and they put in a big triage unit where the helicopters could land when the battles were raging and they could—there were ten stretchers on both sides of that room, where you could triage people, and if you know anything about triage, you take care of the ones that you can take care of and the ones that are too far-gone you just keep them comfortable, which was really one of the most hard things that really impacted me when you see them coming in, helicopter after helicopter of all these guys just wounded and hurt or sick.

DeFries: How did you deal with that while you were there?

[00:35:34]

Amelio: Well, after a while you—you never get used to it, but you just adjust to the fact that war's dirty, people get hurt, and I always felt good because at least I was doing something to help to make—hopefully keep people alive and taking care of them, as opposed to killing people, which I don't know whether I would be able to do or not. I carried a side arm, but (clears throat) never, never was confronted with anybody or somebody [that] was staring at me with a gun that I'd have to pick one up and do something. But by the Geneva Accords, medical staff had a sidearm, they couldn't carry a rifle. But it—it really, when I think about it, it just was—I felt good in my heart because I was doing—helping those guys that were wounded and trying to make them comfortable and stabilizing them so that they could get more treatment and hopefully not—get back to a normal life, when they were—when they got back

and a lot of times, you knew they weren't coming back because they were wounded too much, too badly. But it really was quite an experience. But you just—again, you just adjust to what you're confronting, you know. I can still see certain faces; I don't remember the names anymore, but one young kid in my company who had survived Khe Sahn and really was a very good Marine, he got killed in the A Shau Valley, and that really was devastating because he was short when he got killed and that just—that really hurt [ed. note: Short refers to a short-timer, meaning he was near the end of his tour in Vietnam].

[00:37:27]

And when I was over there I just never had a good feeling about that war. I never thought that we were fighting it properly and I always told people, I said, "As far as I'm concerned, we're over here; they might like us during the day, but during the night Ho Chi Minh's their hero." And we fought that war—they never wanted to do things where they might provoke the Chinese because they didn't want to get in a war with the Chinese. So we would always only do so much and then stop. And I thought to myself, I said, This is not going to end well. I told people that when I was there. I said, "I just don't see this ending well because we're not out to win this thing." And, lo and behold, couple years after I got back home, we evacuated and we—it's a Communist country. So I think about those 58,000 lives, and all the—all the things that people went through for an action that really didn't accomplish anything, in my mind. And it's been almost fifty years, if somebody can tell me differently. I know that their economy's improving, but would that have happened anyway? So I just—I think about that. And when I go down and look at the wall [ed. note: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, DC] and see all those names—and there's people on that wall that I know. In fact, the guy that I replaced at Khe Sahn, Frank Calzia, he thought he was moving back to a little bit of a safer area. He was killed three weeks later and I always remember that. He was from California, nicest guy. And I think about that. I said to myself—that's when I came to the conclusion that if our government's going to get us into wars, we better make sure that we're going in there to win, and if not, then we need to rethink [it] because you spend all that money and you get all these people hurt and killed, and for what reason? I think we're experiencing that again, and that's not a political statement, that's just my reality. So you need to think about, when you're going to enter into these things, why are you doing it? And if you're going to do it, are there other implications and are you going in to win? Because I think that, (taps on table) to me, that was—that war didn't accomplish anything, in my mind. So, I guess that's my little statement about that.

[00:39:48]

So anyway, I was in the medical battalion, got through Christmas. Where I worked when I was in the medical battalion, I was not in the wards. I worked in the S-1 office. We were like medical records. And I ended up—I was the equivalent to a sergeant, so next to the lieutenant and the chief, I was the person in charge of—I had four marines working for me and five sailors and I was like their boss. And we were the ones that took care of all the medical records for all the people that were coming in, talking about what treatments they got, and making sure their records were in order as they moved along. But when casualties came in, everybody was over there working to—because we were all medical staff—not the marines, but all the corpsmen, we'd be over there helping. So that would've been August through the

remainder of my tour there, I was at the medical battalion. And so, during that time in November of '68, [it] would've been, I went on an R&R to Australia, which was kind of cool. I got a little bit of a break for a week and that was an experience; flew down to Australia and had a very good time.

DeFries: What did you get to do while you were there?

[00:41:12]

Amelio: Decompress and drink, (DeFries laughs) and meet—meet girls, go to the beach, drink. (both laugh) It was—and it was a fascinating country and the Aussies really were very, very nice to us. I had met some really nice people and just had a great time. And I took it later because I knew that—[I] didn't want to have a whole lot of time when I came back before I got discharged because that would've been November of '68 and I was getting out around the spring of '69, so I had a couple more months.

I do remember Christmas that year was kind of crazy because everybody who went on R&R and came back to Da Nang, one of the orders was you had to pick up a bottle of booze to bring up (taps on table) for the Christmas party, and so the Christmas party that we had was pretty wild. (DeFries laughs) I don't think that anybody didn't have a good time at that party. One interesting story about that, after I had had a few drinks that afternoon—and we started to party pretty early—there was—they had fluorescent lights that lit the office and that's where it was, in the S-1 office—and there was a black thing under one of the lights, on top of one of the—and I said, "What the heck is that black thing?" So I went and pushed the plastic and it opened up and it was a rat.

DeFries: Oh. (laughs)

Amelio: And the rat flew down and hit me in the chest and ran out the door. So that really freaked me out. (DeFries laughs) I always remember—and they were laughing.

DeFries: How many people were at this party? Was it large?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Oh, my God, it was everybody. We invited people from the medical battalion, so it was all the people in the office and then all the people that worked, you know, they all came over. And we had this big, big—we got a big vat from the—from the chow hall, and the chef and then the people that worked at—just everybody came over—and we made this big, big vat of whatever it was. Mixed all the booze together. It turned out to be a pretty wild—if anything would've happened that night, it would've been—that was Christmas Eve—if anything would've happened that evening, we'd have been in trouble because pretty much the base was not—except essential people that had to be on duty, everybody else was pretty—not in the best of shape, (both laugh) but I do remember that [Amelio note: There was a ceasefire for Christmas]. And we had—they decorated the office with all this gaudy stuff, it was kind of crazy.

[00:43:50]

So then we got through the New Year and I remember New Year's Eve was another party night, and I was thinking to myself New Year's Eve of '69, can I survive? My short-time calendar was really—every day, you had a short timer's calendar that you started when you got there and every day you scratched out another day—and I was getting closer and closer and I said, I hope this—I can see the rest of my tour and everything's okay. So slowly but surely, got to the end of the tour and I finally got my orders to get home. And when I was on my way to get home, not only was I going to be going back home, I was getting discharged because that was the end of my tour. So, I finally got to the day where I was leaving—and a couple days before that, the—Lieutenant Hickey, who was the—in charge of S-1 and he said, “Amelio,” he says, “Stop by the office after work, I need to talk to you a little bit.” So I got to—this must've been—let me think about this. This must've been three weeks or maybe a little more before I was going to be leaving. So we went in and I sat down; it was quiet, everybody else had gone. He says, “You know, Amelio, you've really done a nice job here and we think that you could really be successful in this navy and we would think that you could go to medical service corps school office and become a medical service corps officer.” And medical service corps officers really were the ones that went around to make sure that the hospitals were clean, the chow halls were clean. It was—it wasn't going to be—so I stopped him and I said, “Is this a reenlistment discussion?” and he looked at Chief Brown and laughed, and he says, “Why, I guess it is,” and I said—well, I can't tell you exactly what I said, but I said, “With all due respect,” and I told him. And he said—then he looked at Chief Brown and he laughed and he says, “I told you that's what he was going to say.” (both laugh) So I said, “No, I think I'll pass. I don't think that I'd ever want to spend another year like this,” and he just laughed. He said, “We kind of thought that would be the case, but we had to ask.”

[00:46:08]

So after that, I guess it was a of couple weeks and I finally got my orders to—to get back home and it was going to be a flight from Quang Tri to Da Nang, and I thought to myself, Oh, the plane's going to get shot down, I said. (laughs) So took off, was uneventful, got to Da Nang, and was there for a couple of days and then got the flight assignment to go from Da Nang back to Okinawa. And I remember when that plane took off from—from Da Nang, I remember tears went down my face. I said, I can't believe I got through this year, because there were times when I didn't think I would, and it just was such a relief. And then I thought to myself, Boy, I hope this plane makes it to Okinawa, (both laugh) which it did.

And then you went in and we were the ones coming in, and there were now other guys coming in to go over and the same questions that I was asking, they were asking us, and I tried to—I ran into one or two corpsmen, tried to give them some heads up and some things that I could provide for them. So then we were there for a couple of days and then we flew from—(taps on table) from Okinawa to Japan—or Tokyo—from Tokyo to Anchorage [Alaska] and then from Anchorage and I was discharged from Treasure Island in San Francisco [California]. And—

DeFries: What was the feeling of being discharged?

[00:47:42]

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Oh, when we landed in San Francisco and I just thought one of the first things I wanted to do was take a hot shower and put clean clothes on. Now one of the things that—that I have to say, in my experience—and you hear of Vietnam veterans talking about people spitting on them and not treating them well—I have to tell you that never happened to me. (taps on table) It just didn't. When I was in San Francisco—because we didn't—we were at Treasure Island. It took about five or seven days for us to get discharged and in the evenings, we were allowed to go out on liberty. And I went to different bars with other guys that were getting discharged and I have to tell you that every place we went, that people bought me drinks and people said they knew that you'd had a rough year and it was an unpopular war, but they treated me with all the respect that you could ever—and I never once encountered that [disrespect]. So I'm wondering where—where that happened to people because never once—when I came home, nobody ever said anything other than they knew that it was a rough year and they really thanked me for what I did and knew that it could've been problematic, (taps on table) but that never happened to me, not once. And—

DeFries: You never saw it happen to any of your friends?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) No, no, nobody—never saw anybody saying words walking through the airport or walking in town, never encountered that. And we were in San Francisco and I just never did. Now, maybe I was oblivious, but if somebody would've spit on me, that would've been a problem. I wouldn't have stood for that. So I'd have to say no. And I remember in this one particular bar in San Francisco, (taps on table) there was a nice crowd and there was a piano player and people were sitting around the piano singing, and it was just a really nice evening. And everybody said—I bought not one drink. They bought drinks and they just were so happy that I had gotten home and it just was a very nice experience. So anyway, about the fifth day, I called home and my father said, "When are you coming home?" And I said, "I can't go home until they discharge me." He said, "If you're not home in two days, I'm coming out to get you." I said, "I don't think that's going to work, Dad. They have to discharge me." So shortly thereafter, I was discharged and I flew home.

[00:50:19]

And—and so I resumed civilian life. I was off about three weeks and a friend of mine—who's also one of my kindergarten friends and I still see both of these guys all the time—he got me a job at US Steel. I guess that would've been in March of—March or April of '69 and that's where I met my wife. And I—the woman that hired me—because I told her I wanted to work full-time and go to school at night because I knew I was going to reapply to Duquesne—and her name was Mary King, I remember that, and she says, "Ray, we're going to hire you, but you really—you really should rethink this. You should really think about going to school full-time and working part-time." I said, "No, no, no, I want to work and earn money and I can do it that way." So I did that and by—in the meantime, while I was working at Steel, I walked up to Duquesne and inquired about getting reaccepted again. And that would've been interesting because my QPA [Quality Point Average] wasn't that good, but I met with some people and they said, "Well, you're a different person now," and they gave me the opportunity to come back. And so, I was going to go at night and continue to work, but sometime around July or August, I figured out if I would do that it was going to take me a long time. So I decided to bite the bullet and

go full-time and get a part-time job. So I went to see Mary. I made an appointment with Mary and I said, "You're going to kill me," and she said, "What?" I said, "Well, I made a decision. I'm going to take your advice. I've been reaccepted at Duquesne, so I'm going to go full-time and get a part-time job." And she said, "I could kill you," and then she laughed and she says, "No, that's the right thing to do. When you graduate, if there's anything available, I'll do my best to get you into this company." Well, when I graduated in '71, the steel industry was going to hell in a handbasket. But anyway, she was very nice and so thankful for my service and she said that—she really did smile and she gave me a hug, she said, "You're doing the right thing." So I started at Duquesne in the fall of '69, and ended up getting a part-time job at Pittsburgh National Bank, in the evenings from four to nine. I got a part-time job and that's interesting because, ultimately, I ended up working for Pittsburgh National [Corporation], PNC, for twenty-five years.

[00:53:09]

But that was—that was an interesting period. And one of the things that I started to figure out—that's when I started wanting to work with veterans because one of the things that always kind of bothered me were these guys that came home and had trouble adjusting, and I always—this has been something that I've been thinking about my whole—my whole life since then—why some people come home and don't miss a beat and other people can't get past it. And that's what I—when I started working with veterans, that's how I got involved because that always was something that fascinated me because, quite frankly, I came home—I was in combat—I came home, within four and a half weeks, I picked up my life and to the best of my knowledge, there was no—other than I could talk about my experiences, I didn't think I had any kind of PTSD [Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder] or anything like that. It just—and I wondered what—what transpires that some people can get past that and other people can't. And that's been my quest, working with veterans and trying to figure that out and helping veterans ever since because that just was something that always was on my mind.

DeFries: Have you been able to find an answer as to why that is?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Well, I've talked to—I've talked to different psychologists and different people and they have different theories, but they just say some people are wired different. One friend of mine, he said his experience was that the way certain—certain boys and then men were raised had maybe—if they didn't have an intact family, sometimes when they came back they would have more issues and, like, I don't know how he put that all together, but that was his thought and just a myriad of things, but I just knew that—six weeks earlier—when I started at Steel, six weeks earlier I was at the medical battalion doing what I did, and then moved through the process of being discharged, and then here all of a sudden sitting at a desk, wearing a suit, doing orders, and to the best of my knowledge, didn't miss a beat; and I was just trying to figure that all out.

DeFries: You didn't have an adjustment period when you came home, with your family or—

[00:55:34]

Amelio: No, not really. I mean, I knew I was back home and I knew that when my mother had—when I would go out my mother would ask me certain questions. I'm thinking to myself, Why would you ask me that? I just got through the war, like [she'd say] "Why were you out so late?" "Because I was out so late, Mom," and I was an adult, I said—I knew that going back to school, I didn't have a lot of money, so I was going to have to live at home. And my father said, "You can live at home and we'll feed you," and he says, "You can live here." I knew that wasn't going to be easy because mothers are going to be mothers. So I did it from—until I graduated and stayed a little bit longer and then got married in 1972. So—but that was interesting. But it was—that was an adjustment, living back at home like I was in—a teenager again. "Why did you get in so late last night?" "Because I did." (both laugh) "Where were you all weekend?" "Don't worry." She said, "Well, I worry about you." I says, "You had—you were good to worry about me when I was in Vietnam. You don't have to worry about me now Mom," but she never—she never changed, and I knew it was all well intentioned, but it used to drive me crazy.

So anyway, got back to Duquesne and started in, I guess, September of '69. I would've been at that time probably, let me see—I think I came in as a—it took me two and a half years, I went—I got done in four years, so I must've come in as a sophomore.

DeFries: Okay.

[00:57:15]

Amelio: I guess I had enough grades that were okay that that's where I must have been because I went, like I said, a year and a half and then two and a half is four, right? And I graduated in four years. So I started meeting people that were—I was older, obviously, than the majority of people in my class because they were high schoolers just—and so I started noticing that there were some older guys and started to figure out that veterans were starting to come back. And I had also befriended a woman in the liberal arts office by the name of Madeline Huck, who kind of took me under her wing and we became kind of pals. I would visit, we'd talk and she told me about after World War II and after Korea, there was an organization called DUVA, Duquesne University Veterans Association that was an organization that was set up for vets because they weren't—they were non-traditional students. And she says, "You should look into that." So by then I had met a fellow by the name of Tim Meszar and a few other guys, and we decided that we'd give this a shot because there were more and more vets coming back to school. So it would've been October of '69, we had like an organizational meeting and shortly thereafter, we were started—we started the group. And if you—I don't know, I guess that all the fraternities and all the social clubs are over at the Towers [Duquesne Towers dormitory] now, but when we were in school, on the fourth floor of the Union, that's where all the tables were for the fraternities and sororities and the social clubs. And that's where we had our table.

[00:58:57]

And slowly but surely, over '69, '70, and '71, it really grew. (taps on table) And we knew that we'd have a beginning, a middle, and an end because when the war was over, ultimately these guys and women were going to be finishing up and it would go into suspended animation again, I guess. But we started to have a lot of people

coming around and I think by—oh let me see—by the time I graduated—I graduated in December of '71—we probably had sixty people that were part of the organization. And we had parties and made a lot of good friends and we were really were interfaced with the sororities and were part of that social fabric.

And we got involved—if you're familiar, we got involved with the Third Alternative when the school really found itself in deep trouble. And everybody got involved in raising that to match that money to save the school [Amelio note: Money was promised by an anonymous donor]. And DUVA was right in there doing all the things that that whole group—Rita—Rita Ferko and Pat Joyce were big pushers of that from the student body. But that was a fascinating—that was a fascinating time because the school could've closed and by virtue of all the students pulling together and a lot of other things that took place, we saved the school. And that was really—that was a fascinating year. I guess that would've been—let me think about that—I think that was like '70 and '71.

DeFries: Seventy, '71, yeah.

Amelio: Yeah, yeah.

DeFries: What did it—what other kind of things did you do as veterans in DUVA? You—was it just a way to have support and have people to—

[01:00:49]

Amelio: I think it was support and as guys were coming in—and we had all—all guys and I think one or two women—but when they would come in, we had learned how to maneuver the system and to get the G.I. Bill [Serviceman's Readjustment Act of 1944] benefits and understood how the system works. So one of the things that we did with the new folks coming in, we would explain to them this is the things you have to do to get your check started. And at that time—when I started, I think a check was—you got \$135 or \$125 per month and then, I think in '70, it kicked up to a 175. So we just—and then some guys had—some guys did have issues that they needed to talk through and we were a sounding board for that as well because some guys did have some baggage that—and then helping each other because coming back and learning how to study again and helping them with—work through some of their courses. So we all supported each other that way. And that's where a lot of the guys met their wives because we were very social, always had a lot of parties and it was interesting because we all had part-time jobs and it was just—it was just picking up your life again and doing all the things. We were like—we were like any college sophomores, but we were just older with a little bit more seasoning and understanding things a little bit better. And it was really a—it was a very nice time in my life. Made a lot of good friends. Like I said, there's five of us that still meet regularly and get together with our wives and meet for lunch, maybe every—every quarter, and we still email each other. So—let me see, there was—there used to be nine of us, but Tim's passed away now, Bob is passed away. Let me see, there's about seven of us, but just made really good friends. And I think that the professors appreciated us in their classrooms because they got another perspective, too, a different perspective, and you could have deeper conversations. And I think that the younger students, when they heard those conversations, I think it was beneficial for them too because they were getting a perspective that they didn't have previously.

DeFries: A real world perspective.

[01:03:14]

Amelio: Um-hm. And I made some really good younger friends because you figure at that time, what would I have been? That would've been '69. I would've been twenty-four. Yeah, twenty-four. So—but that was a really a—and interestingly enough, if I could've—didn't have to incorporate my grades from the first year and a half, I didn't do badly the second two and a half years. I was a pretty good student then. But—but that [second] time at Duquesne—and then, I really did love Duquesne then. [It gave me] a totally different perspective. Everybody laughed, they said, Well, you were a little bit more mature then. I said, “A lot more mature.”

But—and the school was starting to change too. When I started at Duquesne—Duquesne really was not a very attractive campus. There were still people living up here, the store was over there. They had the row houses along Bluff Street and that's where the offices were. Your professor—you'd walk up a set of steps, his office was an old bedroom in one of those houses and that's what it was when I left. Coming back, they had—they were building Mellon Hall, the Union had been built, College Hall had been—they were really starting to transform the campus. They didn't have the Walk [Academic Walk] yet, but it was really starting to be transformed and I said, Wow, look what's happening here; and now they've just made it a jewel on top of the Bluff. But the—this library [Gumberg Library] (taps on table) was an old garage and the library was where the law school used to be—is now and so they kind of switched. The Canevin—and then Canevin [Hall]—in the basement of Canevin, was the cafeteria. That's where the jukebox was and that's where everybody went to eat. It would be—when I left and you came back, they had the [Duquesne] Union which was like another—was like a palace, (DeFries laughs) compared to Canevin Hall [Amelio note: When I left in 1965, Canevin Hall Cafeteria is where all students congregated. When I came back it was the Union where everyone congregated]. But Canevin Hall was interesting because it was always crowded, the jukebox was always blaring, and it was kind of dark. You were allowed to smoke so it was always smoky, and that was a fascinating place, but that was the old Duquesne and I came back to the new Duquesne. So it was—it was a good transition. And now look at it, now it's a beautiful campus.

DeFries: Was there any major reactions to the war going on, on campus? I know they had a Moratorium Day in—

Amelio: Um-hm.

DeFries: —1969, I don't know if you remember that?

[01:05:47]

Amelio: There—I think that compared to—there were demonstrations and things that were happening around the country like up in Madison [Wisconsin] and some of the other [campuses]. [At Duquesne] this was pretty benign. I mean, they had a couple of demonstrations and people protesting the war, but it was always very low key. I don't remember anybody ever getting belligerent or no kinds of riots or anything like that.

It was, like, peaceful demonstrations I would have to say and there were a lot of students that just went about their business and didn't—didn't pay too much—they were paying attention, but they didn't get involved in it. And I know the veterans that came back, I never—I never got upset about that because I told you what my thoughts were anyway and so I understood it, but there was no way that I could see myself doing demonstrations and everything. I didn't—I didn't disagree with them, I said, "You guys, you're not wrong," but everybody has to move through their life the way they're going to move through their life. So—but I remember—I remember one walking out of one of the—into one of the hallways and there was a bunch of them and a woman offered me a piece of apple or something and then I said, "No, I'll pass." I don't know what that symbolism was, but I said, "No, I'm okay, but you continue to do what you think is right." But it was—it was always very—Duquesne students for the most part were always well-mannered. There was—they drank a lot, but they—(both laugh) but they were always pretty well-mannered and respectful, that was my—my take. It was a good two and a half years. I just—I really enjoyed it and like I said, I was just a totally different student.

DeFries: What degree did you ultimately receive?

Amelio: I received a bachelor's with a major in political science and a minor in psychology.

DeFries: Okay.

Amelio: As I remember, I know that political—because I thought I wanted to go to law school and my brother went to law school here, but after I watched him, I thought, I don't think I can do that. So I started seeking a career at the bank.

DeFries: Do you mind if I go back and ask you a few more questions about your time in Vietnam?

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) Absolutely.

DeFries: Are there any experiences from Khe Sahn or the A Shau Valley that stand out to you? Or friendships, things of that nature that—that you remember from that time?

[01:08:31]

Amelio: Well, when I got to Khe Sahn and joined Bravo Company, I was the senior corpsman because I had taken the test in Pittsburgh and when I—to become an E-5—and when I got to Vietnam, my promotion caught up with me, so I was an equivalent to a sergeant; so I was the senior corpsman. And there was a guy from Janesville, Wisconsin, by the name of Tom Casey and he was the corpsman with me in our—we were in Bravo Company—and he and I became fast friends and when we started to—when Khe Sahn was starting to change and we were going out on patrols and things, we went out one day and we took a lot of incoming and guys were getting hit. And finally it broke down—we disengaged and we were coming back to camp and I couldn't find Tom and I was really frantic. And as it turns out, he had been hurt too, but he was okay. And we—we had a really good friendship. And then it gets a little bit fuzzy because I don't know whether he left first or I left first, but we got separated. And I've often tried to—I've several times gone up and looked in the Janesville directory to see if I could find a Tom Casey and there were several and I

made some phone calls, but it wasn't—it wasn't the Tom Casey that I knew. So I would—I often wondered what happened to him. And I made some really good friends with some of the people that I went through corps school with at Great Lakes, several of which were killed going forward. And I often wonder where some of—I can still see one guy in particular from Arkansas, Jerry Wyeth, he was just a hoot and I wish I could run into him again. So I met some really good people at corps school, some really nice people on the—on the ship. Had some really good friends on the ship. In fact, one guy, I stay in touch with him and periodically have a phone conversation, George Burke. He's still up in Boston; he was a good friend.

But the people in Khe Sahn, some of the experiences that I had—I was amazed at what some of the doctors could do as they were treating people. You just—I learned so much as I watched these docs treat these folks. And there's a couple of doctors that stick out, Doctor Brough on the ship was one, Doctor Hatcher on the ship. The doctor in Khe Sahn, I don't remember his name because I think I blocked it out, but I can still see him and I blame him for getting Frank Calzia killed because at the battalion aid station, you're supposed to be at the station and they're supposed to bring the wounded to you because that's where you treat them because they're like—they're in the combat area, but behind and it's supposed to be the first area before you move them out. But this doctor liked to go out where the action was and they were walking out to get the wounded and a shell went off and that's how Frank got killed. And there was—there was no reason for that to occur, in my mind. But so—and then Lieutenant—Lieutenant Hickey and Chief Brown, when I was in the medical battalion, they turned out to be really good mentors and good people. Lieutenant Hickey was a lifer, as was Chief Brown, and—but they were both nice guys. And is there anybody else that sticks out? There's certain names that I can remember, but really nice guys that were experiencing the same feelings and things that you were and I guess one of the things that I remember is that I was a little older. So I was dealing with a lot of guys that were, like, eighteen and nineteen and I was twenty-one or twenty-two. So they looked up to me and would sit down and have conversations with them and they were trying to figure out girlfriend things and some of them were going to go on R&R to get married and then come back. And I said, "You sure that's something you want?" "Oh yeah, Doc," and I said, "Okay." I'm thinking to myself, I don't think I'd do that—but some really interesting people. And I can see all of their faces, but over forty-some years, the names have disappeared in some cases. Some are very, very prevalent, but others not. I know I had a good friend in Camp Lejeune [and on the USS *Wasp*], by the name of Pete Gildersleeve, from Connecticut, and he was captured for about seven hours. In fact, there was a picture of a tank with marines on it in *Time* magazine and he was one of them. He was one of those, but he said he was captured for about five hours and then they escaped. That was up in Hue city, whoever he was with. And I did talk to him when I came home, but I've lost touch with him too. But he came from a very wealthy family from Connecticut.

DeFries: Hm, interesting. I had read that there were—that being called—your corpsman was your rank—

Amelio: Um-hm.

DeFries: —but being called Doc was a sign of respect among—

Amelio: Um-hm.

DeFries: —marines and I was wondering what that was like, trying to form a relationship with your fellow marines?

[01:14:30]

Amelio: Oh, marines love corpsmen.

DeFries: Okay.

Amelio: I mean, there's—any time that you would get involved [with a Marine]—or any time you run into a Marine and you let them know who you—what you did, they have nothing but respect because they know you're the—you're the person that's going to save them. And there's been a lot of—well, this new movie that's out, that Mel Gibson directed—

DeFries: *Hacksaw Ridge*?

Amelio: Yes, I believe that the guy that they're talking about was a corpsman. And so, that—and I want to go see that, but you—you can't meet nicer folks than the marines. They—they do what they're told, they get it done, and, God, they just—they give it their all and you just hate to see them get hurt and so many of them do, but they really do have respect for corpsmen. And every time that—any time I get together with them they always just—I've gotten hugs, I've gotten thumbs up, but you're an integral part. They would say, "Hey Doc, you're as much of a Marine as we are." I said, "No, not really, but I'm here to help. But you guys—" (clears throat) But they're asked—when you see in combat with—sometimes what they're asked to do over and over again, it's amazing. But they were really a bunch of good—and they're so young, that's the thing that [gets to you] when you see them—you see them hurt or dead and they were just so young. I mean, younger than me and that just really—that sticks with you, it really does. And, like I said, what really bugs you is when you—you wonder, did they give their life for naught? And that—that's bothersome. But you do what you have to do if you're going to be—if you're going to be a citizen of this country and—but I would—I'm a very strong proponent, if you're going to get us involved in something like that, make sure you know what the hell you're doing. Every—some people said, "Well, how come you weren't a protestor?" I said, "My father would've killed me. That's just not what you do. I knew that I would have to serve and do what I have to do, but after the fact I could express my opinion." So—but yeah, marines have the utmost respect for corpsmen and always have. So it's—it's a good relationship.

DeFries: What—are there any sensory memories that stayed with you from your time in service or the war? Any that—

[01:17:25]

Amelio: Well, you know there's—you talk about there's certain smells and certain experiences. (coughs) There's certain—there's certain smells that you'll never get—get out of your head. You can't—the smell of death. If you go into a village and it had been—we had fought with them and there were dead people; the smell of

decomposing flesh, I mean, you have that. There's just certain—the smell of the operating room, the smell of the ward. There's just certain things that you can remember. One of the ones—I was real good friends with the head cook in the chow hall at Quang Tri and one night I couldn't sleep and he was up working, and so I went over and I went to get a cup of coffee and he was working, he said—I said, "What are you doing?" He says, "I'm going to make doughnuts for tomorrow." I said, "Really? Let me help you." So we came up with an idea, he would cook them and I got a big syringe and filled it with jelly and I injected all the doughnuts. (DeFries laughs) And so that morning, we had a big stack of doughnuts all covered with powdered sugar and the guys went nuts, but we worked all night on that because I couldn't sleep. (DeFries laughs) And I remember the smell of those doughnuts cooking in the grease.

But—and the sound of—I guess, one of the things that was terrifying—when you heard the thump of a mortar, when you were—you heard the thump and you knew it was flying and you had no idea where it was going to land, and it was like terror because it could land right on top of you. So until it exploded, you had no idea. And when you heard multiple thump, thump, thump, thump, you just sit there and cringe and hope that it wasn't near you, but you never knew. Or when you heard the rockets coming over, they sound like freight trains. Where's that going to land? So there was always that, that fear factor. And like at Khe Sahn, when there were these barrages, you'd have all this coming in and there'd be all this noise and people screaming and everything because they were hurt, and people moving and all that and wondering what was happening next. All of those sounds and sights. And then they would drop napalm pretty close to the lines where we were because we were on the perimeter protecting the camp and right in front of us, they would drop napalm and you'd get so close that you could smell it. So the smell of napalm and things of that sort, and watching a whole hill explode because they had—they had B-52s that would fly—you couldn't even hear them, but all of a sudden—they called it [Operation] Arc Light—the whole hill would explode. And you'd just see it all explode and you know it would be some—one of those hills that was surrounding Khe Sahn. All of a sudden the whole hill would explode and every—the ground would shake. You're just seeing and hearing all of that and you go, Wow, what's going on here? So those were—those were some of the sights and sounds that I—and smells—that I can think of.

There's always one that I tell people, if you look at any picture of compounds in Vietnam, you'll see streams of smoke going up and what that represents is the—they have outhouses, they're affectionately called something else, but—and they put fifty-five gallon drums, they cut them in half and put gasoline on the bottom of it. And then guys go in and take care of business and in the morning, they pull them out and they ignite it to burn it. And that's a smell you'll never forget and that's what those columns of smoke are. (DeFries laughs) I have to use—they refer to that as "burning the shitters," is what they—(both laugh) and that's—that's one smell you'll never forget. (DeFries laughs) But it's—like I said, the whole experience of war and coming from where you live to experiencing that, if—when you think about living through that and adjusting to that, it's kind of remarkable actually, it's kind of remarkable.

DeFries: What lasting impact would you say the war's had on your life?

[01:22:03]

Amelio: I—I think that overall, I know that, it's made me really think long and hard, like I said, if you're [the government] going to commit us to things like that, make sure you have a good plan and don't get people killed needlessly because you go on these ventures and all of a sudden, you open up a can of worms. I believe that's absolutely what's happening in the Middle East. I don't know how that's all going to end, but we've lost a lot of people. The difference is, it's a volunteer army and there's a lot of people that they talk about veterans, but unless you—really have somebody involved, people just go about their business even more so than they did back then. When there was a draft, people had skin in the game. Now, it's a little different. So I would think that that's one impact, and the other thing is working with veterans because knowing what I know—and if there's any way that I can help people that need help or their family members, that's always been important to me. That's why I've been involved with Veterans Leadership Program and all the Veterans Breakfast Clubs and doing things to help people. I'm involved in the North Hills Community Outreach because they help families in need and, a lot of times, those families in need are families of people who they have somebody on active duty or they're back and they're struggling to get through things. And so that's where I have—and I think that's been a good part [of my life] because it's helped me to be more helpful to people and I think that's really important, so—

DeFries: Is there anything else you'd like to share today before we—

Amelio: Let me think about that.

DeFries: Anything that I didn't ask that you'd like to share? (laughs)

[01:23:53]

Amelio: Well, I think that I really appreciate the education I got from the school. I think that Duquesne gave me a terrific background. I wouldn't trade what I got from this school for anything. I think that my liberal arts education was second to none and I really do appreciate what I learned here. [I] had some truly good professors, gained some really good insights, (coughs) and some of the things that we talked about in that class and where we are today—in some of my classes—it's fascinating. So it was really a—it was a really good experience and it was the right time, too, because by then, I was ready to learn. So it was—overall, it all turned out pretty well. Although, I guess I laugh and tell people I follow the Frank Sinatra philosophy, I did it my way. So I always tell my kids, I say, "It took your dad little bit longer to graduate than it took you two," because I told them, "You two, four years, I want you to be done. None of this five year plan. Especially the eight year plan, like I was on," but overall, it turned out well. And I guess meeting the guys that I did and the people after I came back was very rewarding. It just was all—it's all good. It's been a good life, I'd have to say. It's had its up and downs, but it's always—it's all been pretty good for me. So that's all, I guess I'd have to say. And—

DeFries: (speaking at the same time) Thank you so much—oh sorry, I'm sorry.

Amelio: (speaking at the same time) No, no, no, that's fine.

DeFries: No, go ahead—continue, sorry.

[01:25:39]

Amelio: I just enjoyed it, I enjoyed it. And I enjoy talking about my experiences and maybe that's one of the reasons why, some people can't talk about it and I think that that's unfortunate because I think people have things inside that they should get out, but they don't know how to do that, and I think that might be one of the reasons why some people struggle. And I've never had that problem. I think that it's important for people to know what people have gone through and I think that I've always been willing to share that, and I guess it's been good therapy for me. That's about it.
(laughs)

DeFries: Thank you so much, Ray, for being here today—

Amelio: Oh, you're welcome.

DeFries: —for sharing your story, and thank you for your service.

Amelio: Thank you.

DeFries: Thank you.

end of interview

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